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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Chicago elementary school principals' views on the obstacles to student learning posed by the socioeconomic and racial/ethnic characteristics of students. The paper includes the principals' policy recommendations for overcoming these obstacles. It focuses on the discrepancies between the ideal and the reality of student failure as experienced in the principals' own schools and discusses the failure of American schools overall to educate disadvantaged students. The report is based on a qualitative study of 13 principals who received an outstanding leadership award in the Chicago public schools. School report-card data from each of the principal's schools were also used to discover the extent of change in student outcomes in each school over the past 3 years. Principals were asked to share their philosophy about educating urban students, particularly minority and low-income students; to discuss why there is an achievement gap between minority students and nonminority students; and to describe programs they have developed to boost the academic achievement of these students. All the principals held that every student can learn, and all were conscious of the many hurdles their students face when trying to learn. However, the principals were willing to search for ways to overcome these hurdles. (Contains 40 references.) (RJM)

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Discourses on Student Learning:

Interviews with Outstanding Principals of Chicago Public Schools

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Purpose

This research is based on interviews with elementary principals in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) who received an outstanding leadership award in the past three years. The purpose of the research is to elicit the principals' discourses about obstacles to student learning posed by socioeconomic and racial/ethnic characteristics of students, and their policy recommendations for overcoming these obstacles both in their own schools and for urban schools in general.

Theoretical Framework

Knowledge – the beliefs held by individuals regardless of how they were acquired – is powerful in shaping reality. The power of knowledge in this sense – from unquestioned assumptions held in common within a culture to knowledge acquired through agreed upon processes of scientific research – is one of the focal areas of postmodern theory (Apple, 1993; Foucault, 1981; Popkewitz & Brennan, 1997). Discourses about student learning and the "knowledge" that underlies it are major determinants of student achievement. Three major discourses on student characteristics that determine learning are prominent in America:

1. A public discourse, which holds that how much students learn is primarily determined by innate characteristics, mainly intelligence (Hammond & Howard, 1986; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992) is often associated with the belief that intelligence is closely linked to social class, race and ethnicity. This discourse has been and still is supported by social science research (Jensen, 1968; Murray & Herrnstein, 1996).
2. An educational discourse on factors in student learning, which is based on large-scale quantitative research, shows student achievement to be highly correlated with social characteristics, particularly race and social class (Coleman, 1966, 1990; Jencks, 1998).

Researchers in this tradition explicitly distance themselves from the discourse of geneticists like Jensen (1968) and Herrnstein and Murray (1996) and the negative racial stereotyping associated with them. This kind of documentation of differences in academic achievement between schools related to socioeconomic and ethnic student characteristics has become part of the public discourse. As school test scores are published widely as a result of the accountability movement, differences in social characteristics of schools are now commonly cited in newspapers as factors that must be taken into consideration when evaluating school performance.

3. A different educational discourse, one that arose in response to the Coleman finding of 1966 that "schools make no difference" (student background does), comes out of the effective schools research (Cruickshanck, 1986; Edmonds, 1981,1984; Levine, 1990; Lezotte, 1985, 1989, 1996; Reed, 1998). Since schools in that tradition of research are often selected as "outliers" from the predicted model that correlates student background with achievement, however, even the effective schools research relies on the paradigm that ties student achievement to demographic background. This model specifies characteristics of schools and school leadership that lead to student success, particularly in low socioeconomic and minority urban schools. One of these characteristics is an expectation that all students can learn. In this discourse, school characteristics are shown to matter more than family background in determining student achievement.

This third discourse, which implies that all students can achieve academic excellence, has become dominant in education (Arnn & Mangieri, 1988; Barth, 1990; Crosby & Owens, 1991; DuFour & Eaker, 1992; Faidley & Musser, 1989; Lezotte, 1996). The discrepancy between this ideal and the reality documented in the many studies showing large differences in student and

school achievement based on demographic factors is a major dilemma in American education. Endorsement of the ideal is tantamount to condemning many poor and minority schools, their principals and staff, as failures. Accepting the reality of these differences as normative means condemning many poor and minority students to low academic achievement and failure.

This research will analyze reflections on this dilemma by successful urban principals. There is prior research on the attitudes of principals about factors in student achievement (Arnn, 1988; Crosby & Owens, 1991; Davidson, 1987; Nash, 1994; Seeley, 1990, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1995; Swanson, 1997; Taylor, 1986a, 1986 b). This research will follow the methods of Seeley (1990, 1992) Taylor (1986a, 1986b) and Villani (1997), but focus questions more on the discrepancies between the ideal and the reality of student failure that may be experienced in the principals' own schools. It will also probe how these principals, most of whom have improved student learning in their own schools, view the failure of American schools overall to educate poor and minority students.

Educational Significance

School reform efforts in recent years are based, in part, on the recognition that public schooling has taken on new relevance in post-industrial society. There are no longer jobs for which reasonably successful schooling is not a prerequisite. Students who do not achieve at an acceptable level in high school will have an increasingly hard time surviving in the adult world (Jacobson & Conway, 1990). Perhaps the discourse on learning gleaned from conversations with these successful principals can contribute to an examination of the most basic assumptions about student achievement, an examination that is required if the appalling statistics relating student school failure and student background are to be changed.

Postmodern theory emphasizes the power inherent in knowledge. It also emphasizes the changes that can result from changes in common discourse. By examining one of these discourses, the discourse about student learning in relation to social background in the context of successful schools, we may be able to contribute, in a small way, to changing the discourse about student learning and improve the chances of success for poor and minority students.

Methods of Inquiry

Selection of Principals

This is a qualitative study, which relies on written statements and interviews with elementary principals who have received the Outstanding Leadership Award in the Chicago Public Schools since 1997, a total of 52 principals. These principals were selected for this award on the basis of written statements about their educational philosophy, on the basis of evidence of improved student achievement in their schools, on the basis of letters of recommendation and "testimonials," and on the basis of observations made in their schools. The written statements of all selected principals are available to the researchers for analysis. This paper is based on interviews with 13 of these principals.

Data Sources

Three sets of data are available for this ongoing study. The first set of data relates to student achievement and student body composition in each of the schools.

1. School report card data are presented to indicate the extent of change in student outcomes in each of the schools over the past three years, and the extent to which each of the schools varies from the student achievement (reading and mathematics) outcome predicted on the basis of student characteristics (percent low income, mobility rate, percent Black and percent

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Hispanic). This set of data is provided to gauge the success of these principals as measured by the accountability statistics collected in the State of Illinois.

2. Principals were interviewed by one of the major investigators of this study. Of the 13 principals interviewed so far, eleven were interviewed by both investigators, and two were interviewed by each of the two investigators alone. Interviews lasted for about one hour, with additional time spent at some of the schools. Each interview was taped and transcribed; one principal preferred not to be taped, and both investigators took notes during that interview. It should be noted that this paper constitutes only one aspect of an ongoing study, which is intended to extend over a period of at least two years.

Data Analysis and Evidence

The interview protocol included the following questions:

1. Would you please share your philosophy about educating urban students, particularly minority students, low-income students and under-achieving students? Has your philosophy changed since you have become a principal of this school?

2. In education, we are fond of saying that all students can learn. Yet the reality is that minority students, both African American and Hispanic, are far behind academically on standardized tests nationally and in Illinois. How do you explain this achievement gap?

3. Have you developed any programs specifically targeted at improving the academic achievement of low-income, African American or Hispanic students in your school?

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for common themes. Themes were coded in the margins of the manuscript, and copied into documents that each contained statements relating to one theme. The following paper is a presentation of the themes relating to the major question of this paper, principals' views of minority achievement. Several themes also emerged in response to the second question relating to programs at the school that promote student achievement. Of these themes, only one is presented in this paper.

Results of the Study

Characteristics of the Schools of Outstanding Principals

There were 52 public elementary school principals who received the Outstanding Leadership Award between 1996 and 1998. As Table 1 shows, the schools of outstanding principals have a higher percentage of white students, a lower percentage of black students, a lower percentage of low-income students, lower mobility rates and higher attendance rates than the schools of Chicago principals who have not won the award.

TABLE 1
Differences Between Schools of Chicago Principals
Who Did and Did Not Win the Outstanding Leadership Award, 1998

	Percent White[2]	Percent Black[1]	Percent Hispanic	Percent Low-Income[2]	Mobility Rate[1]	Attendance Rate[2]
No Award	9.56	59.63	28.08	86.2	28.92	93.45
Outstanding Award	18.55	47.01	29.81	73.9	22.49	94.50
All Schools						
Mean	10.54	58.26	28.27	84.9	28.22	93.56
N	480	480	480	48	480	480
Std. Deviation	17.98	42.86	34.64	18.4	17.38	2.05

[1] Difference significant at $p < .05$
[2] Difference significant at $p < .01$

Although principals who have won the award overwhelmingly work in non-selective Chicago schools, a larger number than expected are principals of selective magnet schools (Table 2). When evaluating the achievement of students, it will therefore be necessary to control for differences in these demographic variables.

TABLE 2
Selection of Outstanding Principals by Selectivity of School

Outstanding Award Principal		Non-Selective	Academy	Type of School Magnet	Total
Not Selected	Count	357	52	19	428
Selected	Count	38	7	7	52
	Expected Count	42.8	6.4	2.8	52.0
	Selected/ Percent of Schools	9.6%	11.9%	26.9%	10.8%
All Principals	Count	395	59	26	480

Chi-Square 7.635 (p = .022)

Student Achievement in School of Outstanding Principals

Before analyzing the qualitative data, it will be interesting to analyze the achievement of students in the schools of these principals. Two comparison groups will be used for this comparison: Chicago elementary schools whose principals did not win the Outstanding Leadership Award, and suburban elementary schools in Cook County. This analysis will show the extent to which these principals succeeded in raising student achievement. Table 3 shows differences in reading and mathematics IGAP scores without controlling for other variables.

TABLE 3
Comparison of Mean Reading and Mathematics Scores of
Schools with/without Outstanding Principals,
Chicago and Cook County 1998

Chicago	Reading	Mathematics	N
Outstanding Principal			
No	183.7	226.30	424
Yes	229.0	274.47	52
Total	188.7	231.56	476
Suburban Cook	260.2	303.30	490
Total			
Mean	225.0	267.95	966
Mean	225.0	267.95	966
Standard Deviation	62.2	59.44	

Schools of "outstanding" principals differ by 45 points in reading, and by 48 points in mathematics from schools of other Chicago principals. Scores in both reading and mathematics in the schools of these outstanding Chicago educators, however, fall considerably below those of the average suburban school. These differences are accounted for by socioeconomic differences between students in city and suburban schools. Table 4 replicates the data in Table 3, but scores in Table 4 show the differences between actual student scores and scores predicted on the basis of the following variables: percent low-income, percent Black, percent Hispanic, percent low-income, mobility rate, attendance rate and per-pupil expenditure. All of these variables remain statistically significant when entered simultaneously into a regression equation.

TABLE 4
Deviation from Predicted[1] Reading and Mathematics Scores of
Schools with/without Outstanding Principals,
Chicago and Cook County 1998

Chicago	Reading	Mathematics	N
Outstanding Principal			
No	.5	.24	424
Yes	23.3	25.77	52
Total	3.0	3.03	476
Suburban Cook	-2.9	-2.94	490
Total			
Mean	0.0	0.00	966
Standard Deviation	25.3	28.70	

[1] Prediction based on regression with percent low-income, percent black, percent Hispanic, percent low-income, mobility rate, attendance rate

As Table 4 clearly shows, students in the schools of outstanding principals do much better than predicted. Given the same types of students and expenditures, schools of outstanding principals score 23.61 point higher in reading, 26.08 points higher in mathematics than other schools; this is equivalent to about one standard error. Interestingly, Chicago elementary schools as a whole, do slightly better than predicted. Suburban schools do slightly worse than predicted, given the student body composition and resources of suburban and city schools.

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While these data point to the considerable success of principals selected for the Outstanding Principal Award, the efforts of these principals nevertheless do not close the achievement gap between urban and suburban students, that is, between predominantly poor minority schools and schools that are, on average, more affluent and have a larger percentage of white students.

Interviews with Principals

The theme that "all students can learn" was pervasive throughout all of the interviews we have conducted so far. Several principals started out their conversations by stating this belief, sometimes before we had asked the first question. The following are representative samples from the introductory statements of these principals.

> My philosophy of education centers around the belief that all kids can learn. The responsibility of the school is to establish a set of expectations rooted in solid educational theory - call it best practice - that expect children to succeed.
>
> Generally speaking all children can learn and, they will learn given the right learning conditions.
>
> My philosophy in educating urban students is the same as educating suburban students -- that you are always trying to use a variety of strategies to reach every single student and you can't lump students in the urban, suburban, rural category because it is how kids learn and being urban or suburban doesn't have anything to do with it.
>
> I personally feel very strongly that children will achieve at a level that you have set. If you lower your standards they will meet that. If you set realistically high standards they will reach them. We need to provide children with the right atmosphere.

Reactions to the Achievement Gap

How, then, do these principals account for the achievement gap that does exist between schools that serve children of different backgrounds? There are different types of responses to the question about the achievement gap. Some denied the existence of the gap and blamed it on faulty testing and societal racism; some cited the usual factors of poverty and social problems as

causing the gap; others cited practices within the school, particularly teacher expectations, as one of the factors associated with the gap; most indicated some problems that students bring to school, but immediately showed ways they had found to overcome these problems. In some interviews, more than one of these positions can be found at different times. In the following quote they are all contained in one single paragraph:

> There is a gap between urban and suburban? ... Well I don't believe it one minute... because I think in a school, whether the school is minority, you start where the kids come from. Definitely environment, their prior experiences have a lot to do where they start in education. If you have a passion and you begin with a great early childhood program and you set high standards in parenting, you know your standards and reach out into the homes and make sure parents get the message, then I think you can counteract all those gaps.

Clearly, this was a difficult question for some of the principals. Although the reasoning of *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1996) was never explicitly mentioned, the implications of this publication for principals in these minority schools must always be present. To admit the existence of an achievement gap is tantamount to being tinged with racism. One principal specifically stated that problems that exist are due to socioeconomic factors rather than race:

> I am not as familiar with the research as you but I would wonder if the research is actually saying minority as much as saying socioeconomic or disadvantaged. I think in my experience ... when they are in a home with socioeconomic problems, they have other dysfunctional things going on and that's going to have the biggest impact.

The following quote again shows the difficulty of addressing this problem, and the dilemma it poses for many of the respondents. A principal denies the existence of the gap – there is achievement taking place, but standardized tests don't measure it. In the same sentence, the principal provides a reason for why the gap exists: The suburban child has preschool and parents teaching him, while the urban child is struggling to survive.

> I have problems with that...first of all the system...we are using standardized tests to determine achievement. To me that is not where it is at...it's like comparing apples and oranges. Comparing the suburban child who has had preschool and parents teaching them and the inner-city child where they are surviving...it is not balanced. Even though the scores are low, achievement is still taking place.

Overcoming Obstacles

In the abstract, the existence of the achievement gap is difficult for some principals to align with their strongly held philosophy that all children can learn. In practice, all of the principals we interviewed have developed programs that increase the achievement of all students in their schools. Many of these programs are based on educational premises that apply equally to all types of learners – such as setting high standards, teaching to more than one modality, or the explicit teaching of phonics in reading instruction. Other programs in these schools are designed more specifically to address the needs of poor, minority or dual-language students, programs that provide both academic and non-academic support to students and their families.

In describing these programs, principals often indicated an awareness of special problems encountered in the school that were related to the background of the students and the problems of the neighborhoods in which the schools are located. But the most dominant theme that emerged from these interviews was the absolute conviction that these problems could be overcome, and that the solution lay within the school, with the principal and the staff. All of these principals were constantly looking for new solutions – in the educational research literature, in successful practices in other local schools, and in national models of school success. All of the principals we interviewed could point to improvements in student achievement, which proved their convictions to be justified.

Principals sometimes took over difficult schools. The principal in the following example said merchants locked their stores when school closed, and that fighting among students was

prevalent. She has solved that problem by initially imposing suspensions on students that were caught fighting. She was called to task on this policy by neighborhood activists, as suspensions disproportionately affected African American students. The school has since adopted the Comer model, a respectful, caring school climate is evident, and it has had dramatic gains in student achievement.

> I don't know how urban students learn different from anyone else, because all students have the ability to learn. I find what impedes the learning in the urban setting is discipline. Children develop a respect for education in their homes. Many children in urban areas have never had that opportunity, so when they come to school they don't have the discipline of sitting down. They don't have the discipline on how to control their anger, feelings and emotions. So they come to school raw, and that impedes their education in the urban area. In an urban-area school the first thing you would want to do is get your discipline under control.

In one school, the principal actually has teachers examine the "probable cause" of student achievement. This principal notes that, as student achievement increases as a result of changes in school practices, the "probable cause" changes from external factors to efforts on the part of faculty and students:

> Well, schools came up with excuses that were outside of themselves: the drugs and the neighborhoods the kids live in; you can't control that. We may as well not come here if that's how we feel. I have my teachers do probable cause. Why do they think the reading scores are low? ... As we begin to hone our skills, learn structure, have curriculum on the line of teaching things that children need to know in ways they can learn, we can see how our probable cause seems to change. Children are achieving because of some things that they are doing.

There are many quotations that could be cited here in which principals indicate a problem they have overcome in their school that is related to a "social ill" in the community, always in the context of finding ways of overcoming that problem, adopting programs inside and outside the school to assist students. The problems that are cited include hunger, violence, poverty and excessive use of alcohol and drugs. The solutions are not always of an academic nature. Principals look for community resources to obtain eyeglasses for children, to provide clothing, or

to provide extra meals. One more example that focuses on non-academic interventions is cited below:

> If I can't change what's happening outside, I can change what's happening in here. We try to understand what children are going through, and I focus my attention on the community. Through that focus, we have extended our school day and planned events for the children. Hunger in this community is staggering, so we have included a third meal in our extended day.

Focus on Student Achievement and Teacher Accountability

Principals of schools in high-poverty areas, thus, are aware of problems that may have an impact on student achievement. Several of these principals took over problem schools, schools that were on probation or close to it. They have looked for effective interventions. Two of the principals we interviewed joined the Comer Project. Several schools are members of the Teachers Academy for Mathematics and Science, which provides extensive professional development for teachers. All of the schools have some ties with outside agencies that provide support, including participation in the Chicago Annenberg Challenge Grant.

In reading the interviews, the concept of internal accountability emerges as the most important common theme shared by all principals. These principals hold their teachers accountable for student achievement. Teachers are given the resources to be successful, with many opportunities for professional development. But at the end of the year, they need to justify student test scores in many of the schools we visited.

In many of these schools, there is a continuous awareness of the achievement of individual students. Students who are identified as doing poorly have special programs designed for them. No student is allowed to fall through the cracks. Principals were able to cite the number of students who failed the Summer Bridge Program, students who had to repeat a grade or failed to graduate. Principals talked about this as a personal failure, a failure of the system of which

they were in charge. Test scores as indicators of student achievement were considered to be valuable information, which guided the curriculum, instructional activities and teacher development in the school. But they were also a sign of success, a cause for pride for the school – for students, teachers and the principal.

This is not to say that these schools take the narrow view of "teaching to the test," except in the sense that they are keenly aware of student outcomes, both on an individual and a school-wide basis. In one school, for instance, the principal talked about aligning the science curriculum with the State test, and the advantage of being able to use the results for program assessment (as opposed to using standardized tests). At the same time, each student in that school has to complete an individual science fair project in order to graduate, and this includes most special education students. In the same school, the principal commented on the use of test results:

> Twice a year I give a report on school progress... Everyone is very sensitive to the fact that we want to know who isn't meeting the state codes. We have made failure a personal thing at this school; we know who those children are... We have used that data to assist us in providing services. Second grade students who are 40% below the national averages are 8% below by the time they hit 7th or 8th grade. It is a tribute to the fact that we as a staff have looked at a horizontal and vertical integration in the curriculum, have improved how we deliver services, have identified kids who are struggling, and have provided a safety net.

Another principal adds this comment at the end of the interview, after describing a myriad of programs in the school to assist teachers and students. For instance, this school is part of the Comer Project.

> I believe for academic achievement that you need consistency in a school. You need to focus on the teachers. Need accountability for the teachers not only for the principal. We use a lot of statistics here. We can read statistics on each classroom and the school. Teachers present them every year. So they have some accountability for them, so that helps.

Interestingly, this focus on student outcomes, both for diagnostic and evaluative purposes, was equally evident in different types of schools: those with a high percentage of low-

income minority students, some of which have recently been at the brink of academic probation, and those that included gifted programs and had some of the highest test scores in the State of Illinois.

Conclusion

The outstanding principals in this study do hold the belief that all students can learn. It is difficult for many of them to square this belief with the fact that achievement scores for schools with a large percentage of minority and poor students are low. In response to other questions, however, many of them make it clear that they are conscious of many hurdles encountered by students in their schools. What all of these principals have in common is the will to search for ways to overcome these hurdles within the school, or, when other community resources are utilized, within the realm that they have power to control. Clearly, these principals are successful in raising student achievement not only in the narrow way that is measured by tests like those in the Illinois Goal Achievement Program, but in a much broader way that includes a more holistic view of students. One last quote from a principal nicely illustrates this attitude.

> Through Dr. Comer we learned the philosophy of "no fault." Stop blaming everybody for things you feel are going wrong in your life; solve them yourself. No longer could we say, "If these children had a better home life, and if they did their homework, they could succeed." It has cured that "not our fault" attitude. If the child is not being fed we make sure that they get breakfast, lunch and dinner. If it is a concern that the child is not properly dressed we make sure they get clothes. Dr. Comer had three philosophies. One was no fault, two was consensus, and three was collaboration. In order to do those three things, I changed the entire climate of my school. No longer were we doing anything but talking about children.

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